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2 legislators attack protection of wolves

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BOZEMAN (AP) — Two state legislators said Tuesday the elk herd that winters in Paradise Valley is in dire straits and Congress should immediately remove federal protections for wolves in Montana.

The lawmakers said they counted so few calves near Daily Lake last weekend that the herd is obviously in serious trouble because of wolf predation. The lake is in the Dome Mountain Wildlife Management Area near Emigrant, a prime wintering area for elk that migrate north from Yellowstone National Park.

I'm convinced the feds need to move immediately to delist the wolf," Rep. Joe Balyeat, R-Belgrade, said Tuesday. "If we stretch this out for another two or three years it's going to be too late. This is a crisis situation."

The northern herd "is falling off a cliff," Balyeat said.

If we get slammed with a bad winter, there will be hell to pay," said Rep. Dan Fuchs, R-Billings.

Fuchs is chairman of the House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee; Balyeat is vice chairman. Neither has any formal training in wildlife biology.

They were accompanied by Dan Walker, chairman of the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission, and two members of the Friends of the Northern Yellowstone Elk Herd, an anti-wolf group.

Using spotting scopes, they counted 385 cows and 48 calves, which works out to a "recruitment rate" of 12 calves per 100 cows.

They maintained that rate should be about 30 to replenish the animals taken by weather, hunters and predators.

Balyeat, a certified public accountant, said he "had been told" the rate should be 30 but could not cite a source.

The National Park Service counts the herd every spring and calculates the recruitment rate. It has said over the past several years the rate has varied from the low 20s to the high 20s.

Prior to 1990, the recruitment rate averaged about 33 percent, but varied widely. Wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone in 1995 and 1996 and are protected by the Endangered Species Act.

Both Fuchs and Balyeat said they wanted to see for themselves what the real numbers were and that Saturday afternoon count indicated the anti-wolf group is closer to the truth, its recruitment rate is less than 10 percent.

Counting a few hundred elk is just a small fraction of what professional biologists consider adequate to determine a recruitment rate. Biologists usually try to count 3,000 to 5,000 animals.

"I don't know how representative it is," Fuchs said of his count. "I hope it's not, because it's alarming."

Delisting of the wolf in Montana would allow the killing of wolves by hunting and other means.

Current federal policy calls for the wolves to be delisted only after there are 30 packs roaming Montana, Wyoming and Idaho for three consecutive years. That countdown has started, but Idaho and Wyoming have been slow in preparing wolf management plans. The federal government won't delist wolves until all three states write acceptable plans.

Montana has written a wolf management plan. Wyoming only recently agreed to even think about writing a plan.

"We made a big mistake, allowing ourselves to be tied at the hip with those other states," Fuchs said.

Tom Lemke, an FWP biologist in Livingston, referred questions to the National Park Service, which calculates the recruitment rates.

In December, Lemke counted 11,969 elk in the herd, a number that is 14 percent below the 25 year average, but "well within normal fluctuations," he said at the time.

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